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SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN REFUGEES IN INDIA UNLIKELY TO RETURN ANYTIME SOON DESPITE WAR'S END

REFS: A) CHENNAI 364 B) CHENNAI 362 C) CHENNAI 051

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and cessation of hostilities in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu are unlikely to return to their homeland anytime soon. Release of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from confinement in IDP camps is a precondition to the refugees even considering return to the island. Refugee fears of human rights abuses in Sri Lanka are another impediment; one that will be more difficult to address in the long term because the information sources on which the refugees rely stoke paranoia about the Rajapaksa government. Finally, the length of time the refugees have spent in India (many have been here for more than 20 years) weighs against a quick return. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Pol/Econ officer met with a group of 46 Sri Lankan refugees to discuss their views on the possibility of returning to their homeland now that hostilities on the island nation have ceased. The Organization for Eelam Refugee Rehabilitation (OfERR) pulled together a group drawn from the more than 70,000 Sri Lankan refugees that live in camps spread throughout Tamil Nadu. Pol/Econ officer spent almost three hours asking and taking questions in a candid interchange with the refugees. While virtually all expressed a longing to return Sri Lanka, they are taking the long view: not one raised their hand when we asked if they believed that they would be back in Sri Lanka by 2015. Their answers revealed that the conditions facing Sri Lanka's internally displaced Tamil population, security concerns, and distrust of the Rajapaksa government all stand in the way of the refugee population in India returning home to Sri Lanka.

IDP camps are first obstacle

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¶3. (SBU) Concern for Tamils interned in the IDP camps dominated the three hour session. The refugees described the camps in Sri Lanka as "concentration camps" and "prisons." Those refugees that had family members in the camps expressed concern for their well-being. They recited a litany of complaints about conditions in the camps, including lack of adequate food and water, overcrowding, and poor treatment by the Sri Lankan military. In addition to concern for family members in the camps, fear of ending up there themselves is a significant bar to return. Refugees from one camp said they spoke to a man from their camp who was sent to an IDP camp after he went back to Sri Lanka last month. Gladston Xavier, an Indian social scientist who works closely with OfERR (and a former Fulbright grantee), told pol/econ officer "none of the refugees" from the north and east of Sri Lanka will consider returning while the IDP camps remain open.

¶4. (SBU) The refugees said they learned about conditions in the IDP camps by speaking to people in and around the camps. One participant said that he had received a phone call from his daughter in one of the IDP camps earlier in the day. According to Xavier,

phones are not permitted in the camps, but a significant number of IDPs have them and communicate with their families in India.

Looking to the world to guarantee their safety

15. (SBU) Xavier, who had led a workshop for the assembled refugees that preceded their meeting with pol/econ officer, said that emptying the IDP camps is necessary, but not sufficient to induce the refugees to return. He said that the refugees feel that an "assurance of safety" and a "durable solution" are preconditions for their return to Sri Lanka. Many of the refugees said that they expected the "international community" to guarantee their security before they would consider returning to Sri Lanka. Some refugees were more specific about which members of the international community they looked to. One woman said that the government of India must "make us believe that it is safe for us to go;" others told pol/economic officer that they wanted President Obama and the United States military to ensure their safety.

16. (SBU) The perception of widespread human rights violations in Sri Lanka animated the refugees' demand for an international guarantor of their safety. A refugee said she feels that nothing has changed in Sri Lanka, citing the continued extrajudicial killings of Tamils. One man said that he did not want to risk bringing his children to Sri Lanka, where they could be abducted by the "white vans." Another man scoffed at the elections in the Northern Province, asking "how can you have an election when 300,000 people are being held in camps?" The refugees also mentioned the government of Sri Lanka's efforts to "colonize" and "occupy" formerly Tamil areas by moving Sinhalese people into them.

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17. (SBU) V. Suryanarayanan, a noted Sri Lanka analyst and member of India's National Security Advisory Board, agreed that the insecurity of Sri Lanka's Tamil population will deter the refugees from returning to the island. He said that the "importance of security to the refugees is unquantifiable," noting that many of the Tamils who left Sri Lanka did so for the security of their children. They will not return to the island, he said, until they know their children will be safe. Suryanarayanan was pessimistic about when that day would come. He said that he did not believe President Rajapaksa is capable of creating an environment that will draw the Tamil refugees back.

Long-standing ties bind some to India

18. (SBU) The length of time the refugees have spent in India, with many of them having arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s, weighs against a quick return to Sri Lanka. At least three of the refugees offered the fact that they have been in India "for more than 20 years" as a reason to go slow when considering return to Sri Lanka. Many refugees have married Indian citizens, and Xavier noted that women who have married Indian men are especially likely to stay in India permanently (but Sri Lankan men who have married Indian women are more likely to try to bring their Indian wives back to Sri Lanka). Children born in India to refugees create a tough situation for refugee parents. One woman said her Indian-born children told her that they would stay in India even if she went back to Sri Lanka, saying "you know about Sri Lanka but we don't know anything about it." On the other hand, a twenty-year old refugee who was born in India told pol/econ officer that she wants to go back to Sri Lanka because India is only a "temporary place" to her.

Unreliable sources fuel paranoia of Rajapaksa government

19. (SBU) The unreliable sources the refugees rely upon for news about Sri Lanka exacerbate their fears. In addition to what Xavier described as "the same inflammatory" Tamil web sites (referring to websites like the pro-LTTE www.tamilnet.com and its Tamil language counterparts), the refugees get news from their families on the island, who are prone to exaggerating things according to Xavier. Absurd statements are accepted as fact: one man credulously

asserted that the Sri Lankan military had used nuclear weapons during the final assault on Mullaitivu. Xavier said many of the refugees believe that the Sri Lankan military used chemical and biological weapons. Rumors and conspiracy theories flow freely through the refugee community. One refugee said families of captured LTTE fighters have been rounded up and disappeared. Another claimed that the Sri Lankan army was not providing sufficient food to the IDPs.

UNHCR says resettlement will take time

10. (SBU) Vidjea Barathy, Associate Repatriation Officer, United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR Chennai), whose office oversees the process of resettlement of Sri Lankan refugees, told Post that approximately 500 refugees have chosen to return this year. Barathy cautioned that this figure only includes official repatriations of Sri Lankans who have officially registered as refugees, but does not include returns from the substantial population of Sri Lankans living in India without official refugee status. Barathy added that there has been a modest increase in returns since hostilities on the island ceased in May. "But it is too early to tell whether this is a trend," he said. All of the 2009 repatriations have been to the Eastern province because the UNHCR does not send people back to the North except in cases of terminally ill refugees.

11. (SBU) Barathy does not expect a significant amount of resettlement of Sri Lankans in the near term. "There will be no major movement before mid-2010 at the very earliest," according to Barathy, with the refugees waiting to see the IDP camps closed and how the returning IDPs are treated. Barathy believes the return will be "phased," with recent arrivals returning sooner and long-term refugees waiting longer. The process will "take some time, all 70,000 of them are not going to go back at once." Barathy said that the refugees' assessment of the safety situation and their economic prospects will determine whether they return. He believes that an active role by the Government of India will be crucial; the refugees need "some level of assurance" that India will be monitoring how the majority Sinhala community treats them when they are back in Sri Lanka.

Comment: no rush to return

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12. (SBU) Comment: Although the war in Sri Lanka is over, the refugee community is not likely to return to Sri Lanka in substantial numbers any time soon. Information flows freely between the island and Tamil Nadu, and the refugees do not like what they are hearing from their fellow Tamils back home. Freeing the IDPs is necessary, but not sufficient on its own to convince the refugees that it is time to go home. Mistrust of the Rajapaksa government's human rights record runs high, leading to perhaps unrealistic expectations that the international community will actively facilitate their safe reintegration in Sri Lanka. Their long period of refuge -- many of the Sri Lankans have spent most or all of their lives in India -- has firmly rooted them in India. India's government, especially the state, has been a generous host. Tamil Nadu generally provides the refugees the same programs and services it does to its own citizens, including subsidized food, basic health care, and education. The state even provides each refugee with a modest cash transfer payment each month, something it does not provide to its own citizens. Post believes that the vast majority of the refugees are here to stay for at least a few years, and that a substantial number would stay permanently if given the opportunity. End comment.

DALTON